

IN A THICKET¹

By GLENWAY WESCOTT

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THE mist thinned and broke like a cobweb in the May sunshine. A young girl opened her eyes; through the window beside her bed they rested on a cloud of plum trees in flower. The little house where she lived with her grandfather stood in a thicket of trees, blackberries and vines. She saw the vapors gather as dew upon some cabbages and lettuce in the garden, and the black crooked trunks sustaining a weight of flowers.

She was troubled by a memory of the night in incomprehensible fragments. She had been aroused suddenly by sounds which her mind, confused with sleep, could not estimate. The moon, submerged in mist, had swept the cottage with a whirling and opaque atmosphere. She had lain still, her heart beating fast and loud.

Then, another movement, some footsteps on the porch. Seemingly padded, they were separated from one another by silence. Was it an animal? Too heavy for a cat, too elastic for a dog. Were there wilder beasts in the thicket? The door between her bedroom and the room opening upon the porch stood open. Her speculations died down with her breath. Something pressed upon the wire screen of the window. It brushed against the screen door, and seemed to shake it by the latch. It paced back and forth, a soft, persistent prowler.

She trembled with curiosity and fear. An instinct warned her that it was not an ordinary thief. She would have liked to rise, to see, to know; her limbs would not respond. The night, both gray and dense, unnerved her.

Subdued noises and movements persisted irregularly for

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what must have been an hour. Once she heard them sweep across the grass to the back door, also hooked from within, and return. But her vigilance relaxed; waves of unconsciousness blotted out whole sounds and moments of hush; and suddenly she was awake in the tranquil sunshine.

In the kitchen her grandfather was moving in a pleasant odor of eggs and butter. For three years the orphan, now fifteen, had lived with the old man—a schoolmaster whose needs had been so simple that he had saved, from the miserable salaries of many years, enough to provide for his old age and more. She found him on the porch, last autumn's wild cucumber vines flecking his face with shadows, his hands in his lap.

"Good morning, Lily," he said, in his sweet high voice.

"Good morning, Gran'pa." She kissed his cheek where it was cool and like paper above the white beard, and crouched on the steps.

What little they had to do was as simple and solitary as a movement brought about by the sunlight, which dropped delicately upon fresh leaves, vegetables, the strawberry bed, grass, birds, and petals. They were shut off from the road, from noise and passers-by, from the sight of other houses, by the grove, which opened on one side only, on a wheat-field bounded by trees.

For two years Lily had not gone to the district school because of the age and remote dwelling of her grandfather, who taught her, easily and informally, at home, where she turned the pages of his library broodingly, with vague disappointment: books of history, letters, and particularly of natural history, such as the notebooks of Audubon and Agassiz. Meanwhile he wandered in the grove or on the lawn, or farther afield. His hands clasped behind his back, he hummed and whistled. In the early twilight they worked together in the garden, upon the products of which, with those of the hencoop and wild nuts and berries in season, they lived. His existence had shrunk into the circle of trees, and he was content with their noncommittal beauty, their concentration. But the girl's eyes sometimes ran darkly upon the horizon.

"Are you ready for breakfast, child?" the old man asked.

When they had eaten, he polished his silver spectacles on a corner of the blue tablecloth, arose, and took down a Bible from a small shelf of its own. Slow and firm, he read a chapter of Revelations.

If there had ever been an interruption of this morning worship, Lily would have dreaded its return. Today her emotion revealed itself more clearly, as if a carving in low relief had moved outward and detached itself from the stone. The tumult of coarse emotion and unknown crime which agitated the old text disturbed, even offended her. She remembered the night and the intruder. Her grandfather knelt by his chair, she by hers.

"Oh, dear heavenly Father," he prayed, "mold us to do thy will. Let our feet ever walk by the light which thou hast given us. Do not let them stray into temptation, or be stained by sin. Dear Father, we come to thee humbly, knowing we have been evil—covetous, quick to anger, lusty for power, licentious. Do not punish us according to our deeds, but forgive us according to the sacrifice of thy dearly beloved Son."

The girl's thoughts wandered, excited by the solemn beauty of his voice, by the obscurity of the words. What was it which had wakened her? What did it want? Where was it now? Should she ever see it, ever know?

"And bring us at last into thy heavenly house, to abide with thee forever. Amen."

As Lily washed the few dishes and placed them on the lace-papered shelves, she heard voices on the piazza; and found her grandfather talking to Mrs. Biggs, a woman who sometimes came to do their cleaning.

"And what had the man done?" he said.

With a cunning look at the girl, the woman ignored his question. Having stopped on her way to another farmhouse to bring a piece of news, she felt obliged by the presence of this young sober creature to omit its details. She squinted at the sun, red hands upon her hips, and outlined the exciting but commonplace story.

A negro had escaped from the penitentiary. The State prison brooded over this countryside, a hideous fortress of red brick made more hideous by a row of trees planted

against the walls. From tower to tower upon these walls guards walked, night and day; separated from the building by a bare courtyard in which every shadow was immediately visible. At night one of the towers upheld, like a lighthouse, a gigantic lamp, which twinkled into many bedroom windows, a reminder of something mysterious and submerged, over the forests, marshes, farms, and melancholy black dense hemp-fields.

Lily blanched and withdrew cautiously through the door.

The negro, imprisoned some years ago for a crime of violence, had seemed, in the prison, so subdued, so contented, that he had promptly become a privileged trusty. He drove the superintendent's car, and sometimes went about the town alone upon errands. From time to time he displayed an internal excitement taken to be religious or even penitential, since it was indicated by a greater degree of gentle sadness and by low fitful singing of spirituals. It had been thought best to restrict his movements during these emotional fits; but the warden had sent him carelessly to the post office the day before. He had left the car less than a mile from the prison and disappeared.

Almost immediately the bewildered authorities swarmed over the country, expecting to take him by nightfall. But they were disappointed; the felon was still at large. He had been wandering around all night. He was loose now.

Lily was in a storm of excitement. It made nothing more clear; the relation of the news to her experience seemed insubstantial and incomplete; but she felt that the obscurities which had troubled her, the unknown, the difficult, the hypnotic, were to be revealed in a flash of light, emanating from Mrs. Biggs. She shrank into a chair.

Mrs. Biggs repeated each fact several times, panting with eagerness. She lowered her voice and rolled her eyes. But at last she reached the end of her information, and paused, discouraged.

The silent moments prolonged themselves in a twitter of birds and fowls. The old man sighed and stroked his beard. "Well, poor man," he said, "I suppose they'll catch him."

Mrs. Biggs asked loudly, "Aren't you at all afraid?" For

the second time the girl felt a surreptitious glance upon her.

"Oh, no," he returned mildly. "We are simple people, poor people. We have no money. We haven't anything he'd want."

Then, with something like timidity, she asked, "Do you like to live here in the thicket, so far back from the road? I've always wondered why you did it."

"Well, I don't know," was his absent reply. "I'm used to it. I've been here a long time. We don't get any noise and dust from automobiles, and the birds come here."

He descended slowly the veranda steps. Mrs. Biggs hurried off with her burden of alarm; her shawl caught upon weeds and bushes. In the sunlight his beard glimmered beneath the honey locusts.

In the silence of the house Lily went about her interrupted tasks.

At dinner her grandfather was silent and aloof. He had his days of a preoccupation which the girl called "growing old." It arose within him, pure, unannounced, and unearthly, like the radiance which a candle-flame shoots through the wax beneath. She wondered if the negro's sad spells were like his. She knew that he had forgotten the morning's news, that he brooded upon nothing known to her.

As the afternoon passed by, a globe of light and fragrance, his mood deepened and darkened. For a year she had struggled to understand it, with only vague weak conclusions. Was it sadness at the expenditure of his life? Loneliness for those whose knowledge was simultaneous with his? Was it memory which troubled that mind like a pool, as if sunken things arose and floated on the surface?

His eyes seemed to turn away from the trees, clouds, birds, shadows, garden, away from her, to look within. He worked only a few minutes, but paced around the garden and sat in a wicker chair, shading his eyes with one hand.

Under the trees beside him the girl mended some clothes. Her courage sank low and lower, but persisted. The sun declined in the plum trees. Acute rays came between the trunks of the thicket; those of the poplar became silver, the birch pink, the ironwood black. In silence the voices of

some geese, trembling through the air, set up there a vibration like themselves.

She arose and kissed her grandfather; his face was smooth, cold, and frail to her lips. "A good girl," he murmured. Should she tell him about the night? For she was sure the negro would return. What was to keep him from coming in? Nothing, nothing at all.

As she thought of the situation she found resources in herself which she did not name. Her ignorance provided no concrete images to feed fear; and something within her implored the indefinite to break apart, to take shape. In her courage there was curiosity; in her curiosity, a challenge.

Night appeared in little flecks on the undersides of leaves. Lily watched her grandfather. As twilight thickened, a similar shadow seemed to gather within him, behind his eyes. He was unnaturally pallid—a mere shell separating two shadows. One day it would crumble; she would be alone, always alone, bodily alone, as she seemed then.

Suddenly she thought of the stranger with security. What harm could he do her? How could she be harmed? She saw him quite distinctly, not in person, but as a separate outline as small as her hand, singing to itself, and an embodiment of sadness.

It pleased her now to add reasons to her instinctive decision not to share the secret. Her grandfather was old and not strong; he would not understand; it would only frighten him and remind him of his deafness. Now it was too dark to sew, she folded the white cloths and laid them on the grass.

In the night she awoke and knew that the negro had come. As before, her body was already rigid, her heart accelerated. On the floor the moonlight fell in crisp rectangles. Some trees rose in columns from the lawn, seamless and abrupt. Between them the light clinked like a castanet. The footsteps on the porch were undisguised and reckless. He fumbled at the screen door, at the windows. He scratched the wire tentatively with another metal, and ceased as if afraid of the noise. She arose in the bed upon her elbows. A deep sigh, sibilant against the teeth.

Her arms ached with tension. A great silence arose as a growing plant arises. Her imagination fixed upon it, half in terror, half in hope. It spread and shook out its leaves.

In the garden a tree toad tinkled to itself.

She slipped out of bed. Her nightgown swung about her ankles. As she crossed the moonlight her legs glimmered in the sheer cloth. A braid caught and slipped over the back of a chair. Her progress was slow and irregular, as if she wavered or floated. Not a board protested under her bare feet, upraised at the instep. Her eyes spread to admit something not yet apparent, and she was guided between chairs and tables by instinct.

The porch door thrust into the dark room a broad short blade of light. Lily skirted it, and saw the black man.

He was on the steps, his legs spread, his bare head bent enough to fix his gaze in the gray grass. He wore tennis shoes, trousers, and a battered coat. Between its buttonless edges, the moonbeams rested on the close, hard folds of his belly, like furrows turned by a chisel.

She had never seen a negro; separated from her by ten feet and a thin fabric of wire, he was not so black as her imagination of him. In the dead brilliance his cheeks glimmered softly, pallid not in themselves, but as a surface burnished. Only a film of color clung to his lips. He rested his chin within hands almost white across the palms, and turned his great white eyes toward her. The damp curled upward around her bare body.

Midnight passed. The two poised there side by side. Consciousness was suspended in the air; but it did not establish the contact which would have altered their relation. The moon slipped through the sky. Sometimes his sighs were clear; he seemed to breathe forth a single mysterious vowel. She brushed against a pillow, which fell and settled heavily on the floor. Surely he would hear and come. The blood rushed to her head in a loud flood.

But he did not. His desires, the tentacles thrust outward toward something in that house, had been withdrawn; and gathered, in a knot almost visible, about some inner crisis. He rose abruptly, stretched himself, and strode away, over the grass. The dew plashed on his canvas shoes.

Before her grandfather came downstairs, she arose into a day lurid and insecure. Some robins worked upon the flagrant bright green sod. Everywhere were clots of color and vortices of movement she had never seen. A superb thunderhead palpitated in the sky like a tree with black blossoms.

As she regarded it, a smaller sight arrested her: upon the screen door a gash three inches long, made by a wedge or chisel before she woke. She stared at the opening, from which the soft wire bent back neatly.

The old man, whistling like a boy, found her there. He did not see the trace upon the door.